In the ongoing debate of whether leaders are born or made, count the University at Buffalo’s School of Management firmly on the side of “made.” In 2010, the school launched LeaderCORE™, an intensive two-year leadership development program, as part of its full-time MBA program. LeaderCORE focuses on helping students develop a clearly identified set of leadership competencies that will allow them to contribute to their workplaces immediately as effective leaders and team members, as well as enhance their career potential.
curricular innovation

With only one graduating class so far, the program shows every sign of meeting this goal. Alumni and their employers are reporting successes, and the school’s Career Resource Center is already receiving requests from prospective employers to refer students who have participated in the LeaderCORE program. Other MBA schools looking to improve the leadership component of their programs have begun using LeaderCORE as a benchmark, and the program was selected the winner of the 2012 MBA Roundtable Innovator Award.

Building on a Strong Foundation

The UB School of Management’s MBA program had a strong leadership component before launching LeaderCORE, particularly the Leadership PACE course. Introduced in 1999, PACE (Personal Achievement through Competency Evaluation) was designed to assess and develop students’ leadership skills. In a 2009 survey, the course received overwhelmingly positive feedback from alumni, who also urged the School of Management to build on that success. The survey inspired Jerry Newman, SUNY Distinguished Teaching Professor, to propose a more robust program.

“I realized what PACE was missing was a results orientation,” said Newman, who is a key member of the School of Management’s planning team and is considered LeaderCORE’s visionary. “PACE had an assessment component, but the course was mostly developmental, with little focus on whether or not it worked in the long run. We had no evidence that students were using the skills they developed in other courses or work situations.”

Newman sketched out a plan to build on PACE’s success. It featured a two-year program that included leadership assessment, development, and certification. He presented it to Dean Arjang Assad, who was immediately supportive and appointed a committee to help develop the program. “The whole mindset of the dean and the committee was ‘Let’s be on the leading edge—let’s not benchmark ourselves against other schools, let’s be the benchmark,’” said Newman.

The strong support of the dean put the development of the program on a fast track and in less than two years, the pilot program was ready to accept its first enrollees for the fall 2010 semester.

The Core of LeaderCORE

Developing the leadership competency model was key to creating an effective program. Using business research, interviews with dozens of companies that hire MBA graduates, and surveys of School of Management alumni, the committee generated a lengthy list of potential competencies. Further interviews narrowed the competency list down to 10, divided into three dimensions—motivation, people, and thinking dimensions—with integrity as a central anchor for the other nine competencies. (See Figure 1–LeaderCORE Competencies Model)

Each competency has been further defined with a list of behavioral indicators, at three different proficiency levels (Proficient, Superior, and Role Model) that build on each other. For example, the behavioral indicators for the “Team Leadership” competency include “Keeps people involved and feeling valued” (Proficient); “Provides coaching support to others” (Superior); and “Empowers others where appropriate—delegating the ‘what’ as well as the ‘how’” (Role Model). Each of the levels is further described with 3 to 10 more specific behavioral indicators, all making it easier for the student to understand what the competency looks like in practice. To assist students in developing these competencies, each MBA course is mapped to the competencies and many of the co-curricular activities also include information on which LeaderCORE competencies they focus on.
Comprehensive, Supportive, Individualized

With the core competencies identified, the UB School of Management developed the structure of LeaderCORE. The major components of LeaderCORE are assessment and feedback; challenge and development; support, such as coaching; and certification. The LeaderCORE schedule currently includes:

Fall, first year: Introduction of LeaderCORE to all students and application to the program for students interested in participating.

“Having students apply to be admitted to LeaderCORE is probably the single most important decision we made,” said Newman. “It forces personal motivation to be a factor, and that’s key to being a great leader and contributor—doing things not because you have to, but because you see a way to make things better.”

Students who are selected attend LeaderCORE orientation and are introduced to the development log, where students track activities related to learning, development, and application of the competencies.

Spring, first year: Intensive assessment activities through the LeaderCORE Development I course.

The initial assessment center is a day and a half long and helps students identify their leadership strengths and development opportunities. Activities include an in-basket exercise, a leaderless group exercise, an oral presentation, leadership and team simulations, DiSC assessment, and the launch of the first of two 360-degree assessments. LeaderCORE initially used off-the-shelf assessment tools, but has now developed a 360-degree assessment and feedback tool tailored to the LeaderCORE competencies. Students use the assessment results and other feedback to create an individual development plan. Students also have several opportunities to work in teams to start developing their team-related competencies and learn how to effectively give and receive feedback on their performance.

“Self awareness is the first stage of motivation and sometimes students come out of this course with a completely different vision of themselves because of the strengths they identified,” said Muriel Anderson, the faculty co-director of the program, along with Nick Everest. The two also team teach the LeaderCORE Development I course.

“I’ve also seen the opposite occur, where certain students come in with an extremely high level of confidence and have had their eyes opened about competencies they need to develop,” she said. Everest has also noticed a great range of experiences among the students. “I’m struck by the diversity of the students in our program,” he said. “They can range from 21-year-olds with no substantial work experience, to ex-military officers with combat experience, to foreign students with three to four years work experience. We provide them a common framework to work within, but the assessments and the development plans allow them to individualize the program to meet their development needs.”

Summer: An internship that provides opportunities to put the competencies into practice and further develop students’ leadership skills.

Fall, second year: The LeaderCORE Development II course (added to the second year of the program to provide more challenging experiential learning opportunities for the students).
“We originally offered LeaderCORE Development II as an elective, because we felt we needed to provide more opportunities for students to be challenged,” said Everest. “But we were disappointed with the response—it was competing with too many other electives. So we reconfigured the two LeaderCORE courses to make them required two-credit classes, compared to what was originally two, three-credit courses, only one of which was required. In LeaderCORE Development II, they do an action learning project, with plenty of coaching support, that focuses on implementing their development plans.”

**Spring, second year:** A second assessment center (to be added next year) and the certification defense, in which students “bid” to be certified as Proficient, Superior, or Role Model.

The second assessment center is being added to measure the students’ progress and provide them with additional feedback on how well they have developed their leadership competencies. Students will complete it near the end of their program.

The certification defense is a one-hour behavioral-based interview with one internal assessor and one external assessor, typically an executive-level alumnus. Prior to being interviewed, students prepare a packet for the assessors to review that includes information on their career aspirations, their certification bid, and their growth and development over the course of the LeaderCORE program.

“We didn’t want this to be a rubber-stamp program,” said Anderson. “We wanted the students to be able to demonstrate—to us and to their prospective employers—that they had these competencies.” While most students in the inaugural class achieved the certification level they applied for, some were certified at a lower level, some at a higher level, and two did not pass their certification.

**Elements present throughout the LeaderCORE program:** Coaching, development log, and development activities.

LeaderCORE was designed to be a thread that weaves throughout a student’s two-year MBA program. Three of the most prominent threads are coaching, use of a development log, and co-curricular development activities, such as internships or discussions with area business experts.

LeaderCORE provides two different types of coaches. Faculty and staff serve as process coaches who meet regularly with the students to check their progress, help them see patterns of behaviors, and ask them questions that can help them deepen their understanding of certain experiences. Competency coaches are usually alumni who have volunteered to share their experiences and support related to a specific competency or situation.

The development log is a spreadsheet that students use to track activities or projects, as well as the behavioral indicators and competencies they demonstrated as part of the activity. Originally called “journaling,” the development log was a hard sell at first. “One of the reasons we stopped calling it journaling was because it didn’t sound professional enough to many of the students, particularly in the context of a rigorous, highly analytical MBA program,” said Everest.

The first year, students expressed concern that the actual journal forms were too open-ended—they wanted more prompts on what types of information should be logged. In response, Everest and Anderson challenged a pair of highly engaged students to design something better. “And they really did!” said Everest. “They designed...
Curricular Innovation

an Excel spreadsheet with prompts, drop-down menus, an ability to save the current development log to the master log—all sorts of learner-friendly features. We’re still using it.”

Practicing What They Preach

With LeaderCORE’s strong focus on ongoing development and continuous learning, the leaders of the program feel equally committed to improving the program. In addition to the numerous changes and adjustments mentioned above, LeaderCORE has other changes planned for the years ahead, including strengthening its coaching component by offering coaches workshops and other training.

“One of the key skills of leadership is learning from experience, so we want to make sure we practice what we preach.”

“We also feel we’ve gotten better at identifying and assisting students who are struggling, in part by keeping in closer touch with the coaches,” said Everest. Small adjustments include amending some of the behavioral indicators to bring them in line with academic research, and changing one of the assessment exercises from a case study to a simulation.

“We’re still looking for ways to improve, big and small,” said Anderson. “One of the key skills of leadership is learning from experience, so we want to make sure we practice what we preach. We’re constantly asking for feedback from our students, coaches, recruiters, corporations, and faculty.” Anderson also gives credit to the ongoing LeaderCORE Steering Committee. “We have representatives from all different areas of the UB School of Management and the MBA program and they give us fantastic input and support,” she said.

Although Anderson, Everest, and Newman all feel the program should remain optional, they can envision a time when most, if not all, of their MBA students apply to be part of LeaderCORE, reflecting the increasing importance of soft skills in the business world. They’ve already gone from an initial cohort of 31 out of 100 students to 58 of 94 students in their third cohort.

“I certainly think it’s scalable, not only for us, but for larger programs or Executive MBA programs,” said Everest. “You need the resources, but it all comes down to assessment, challenge, and support, which allows you to personalize the experience both for the individuals and for whatever size or type of group you’re working with.”

More schools may want to consider such an approach based on the feedback UB School of Management has received from many of the recruiters and corporations with whom they are connected. “This is exactly what business schools need to be doing,” said Rich Floersch, executive vice president and chief human resources officer for McDonald’s Corporation, and one of the executives consulted during the development of the LeaderCORE program. “Students who can work effectively both within teams and in leading teams will always be in high demand. LeaderCORE will ensure this development occurs before they enter the work force.”

For more information on the LeaderCORE program, visit http://mgt.buffalo.edu/programs/new-york-mba/leadercore.
When Akruti Shastri heard about LeaderCORE™ at the start of her MBA program in fall 2010, she didn’t hesitate to apply, even though the program had no track record at the time. “It was an opportunity to gain competencies and connections that would be invaluable in the work world,” said Shastri. “I thought it was a no-brainer—here’s a place that was willing to spend the time and effort to help me develop professionally, and it was all part of the tuition. It would help set me apart from other MBAs because I would be able to demonstrate that I bring more than technical skills to the table.”

A year later, David Charron made the same decision. “I was impressed by the whole MBA program because they were very honest about the fact that if you just went to class and did your coursework, you wouldn’t be getting the most out of the program,” said Charron. “They really stressed the connections, the internships, and the co-curricular activities that can make your MBA experience more valuable.”

“LeaderCORE was a critical part of that for me,” continued Charron. “Participating in LeaderCORE means you have made a commitment to work on yourself and the competencies you want to bring to your work. It put a framework around my personal and professional development activities that helped me figure out where I wanted to go and what I needed to do to get there. And with tools like the development log, you could actually see your progress.”
The connections were important to Charron as well. Four months before graduation, Charron had already received three job offers, choosing an associate director of career counseling position with the UB School of Management’s Career Resource Center. “Because LeaderCORE encourages you to get input from others, many of the people I was interviewing with were people I had already reached out to when I was exploring where to do my internship, or had met with to discuss their process for making certain decisions,” said Charron, who in his final semester is pending LeaderCORE certification at the Role Model level.

Shastri, who currently works as an ideation specialist for HealthNow, praised LeaderCORE for making her a constant learner. “During the two years of the program, you’re constantly looking for ways to grow—to leverage your strengths and turn your weaknesses into opportunities to grow,” said Shastri.

“You learn to ask for, and welcome, feedback from your classmates, the faculty and staff, and anyone else around you. One of the competencies I worked on the most through LeaderCORE was interpersonal skills, particularly being able to individualize my approach depending on the person and the situation. I was recently evaluated at work and individualization came up as one of my top five strengths, so I think it worked!”

She also praised the certification process, where Shastri bid and earned a “Superior” rating. “You need some sort of evaluation process to ensure that the steps you’ve taken to improve yourself were appropriate and successful,” she said. “And preparing and delivering your defense is invaluable. By the time you graduate and are going on interviews, you are so ready. You have all your talking points in line and know how to demonstrate through your experiences that you have the competencies they are looking for. You’re so well prepared, it doesn’t even feel like an interview.”

Both Charron and Shastri said LeaderCORE’s assessment and development process also helped them define the direction they wanted to take their career. “You look for patterns in the things you enjoy and do well,” said Charron, who had a career in workforce development prior to earning his MBA. “I was prepared to reinvent myself, but I found myself gravitating to some of the same things—positions that required strong interpersonal communication and strategic skills, using data to inform strategy, and some sense of purpose, particularly helping others to help themselves.”

For Shastri, the LeaderCORE process helped her identify health care as a field she was interested in, but also made her realize that it was important to keep dance in her life. “Your coach will tell you that if something keeps coming up again and again in your journal, you need to pay attention,” said Shastri.

“Working on the self-management and adaptability competency in particular teaches you to balance your work and personal life. And right now I feel like I’m making an impact in my job, I run a dance school on the weekends, and still have time for a fulfilling personal life.”

It doesn’t get much better than that.
The MBA Roundtable Innovator Award Finalists

The LeaderCORE™ program described in this article was the 2012 winner of the MBA Roundtable Innovator Award, which was created to recognize and promote innovative initiatives in MBA education and to acknowledge the institutions that are driving change in the field.

Auckland University of Technology was chosen for its Developing High Performance Teams Initiative, an innovative approach to developing the skills needed to create and participate in high-performing teams. The initiative combined theoretical study via classroom discussions, exercises, and assignments, along with practical knowledge of high performance team skills, including the experiential learning of participating on a rowing team.

Fayetteville State University was recognized for its Integrated Distance Learning and Online MBA Program, which uses video conferencing technology and remote teaching centers to deliver online courses with the look and feel of a traditional classroom experience. The new delivery methods also helped the university better meet the needs of the area’s significant military and health care communities.

Monterey Institute of International Studies was selected for its unique Frontier Market Scouts Program, which targets professionals who aspire to careers in social ventures or impact investing. The program combines academic and global experiential training, offering a rigorous two-week training session followed by a six-month internship with leading impact investors around the world.

Rice University was honored for its MBA Capstone Course, which provides teams of Professional and Executive MBA students the opportunity to research, assess, and develop detailed strategic plans for Houston nonprofits with critical challenges. The program benefits the nonprofit while providing students a meaningful way to apply classroom theory and concepts to a real-world problem.

Four other MBA initiatives were selected as finalists:

Auckland University of Technology
Monterey Institute of International Studies
Rice University

“This year’s finalists were all engaged in the kinds of innovations needed to keep MBA education relevant in a disruptive world,” said Henry Eyring, a member of the selection committee, co-author of Innovative University: Changing the DNA of Higher Education from the Inside Out, and advancement vice president at Brigham Young University-Idaho.

The selection committee also included Jacque Anderson, a consultant with the Center for Character Based Leadership; Stuart Kaplan, global chief operating officer and education industry lead for Korn/Ferry Leadership and Talent Consulting; Russell Ness, director of Ness Consulting and executive-in-residence for Auckland University of Technology’s MBA program; Jackson Nickerson, Frahm Family Professor of Organization and Strategy at the Olin Business School at Washington University in St. Louis; Casey Rasata, the global university relations director for Eaton Corporation; and JD Schramm, full-time lecturer in Organizational Behavior and founding director of the Mastery in Communication Initiative at Stanford Graduate School of Business.